

GOETHE AND CRITICISM.

BY THE EDITOR.

GOETHE'S world-conception including his view of the divine power that acts as a dispensation in the universe, was mainly poetical. To be sure he was neither anti-philosophical nor anti-scientific: but he abhorred analysis, dissection, criticism, in brief all negativism, or in other words that process of thought which is treated with a sneer by Mephistopheles in "Faust" (I, 4):

"He who would study organic existence,
First drives out the soul with rigid persistence,
Then the parts in his hand he may hold and class,
But the spiritual link is lost, alas!"

Goethe was at sword's points with both extremes, the pietist or dogmatist, and the iconoclast or negativist. The former was represented among his friends by Jacobi, a wealthy privateer and, as an author, an able and worthy representative of the Protestant faith;* the latter by Wolf, a philologist and the first higher critic of Homer, and also by Friedrich Bahrdt, a liberal theologian and a rationalist.

Friedrich August Wolf, born at Haynrode, near Nordhausen, Germany, February 15, 1759, was perhaps the best classical scholar of his age. Having completed his studies at Göttingen, he held a chair as professor of classical philology at Halle from 1783 to 1807; whereupon he entered the Prussian government service at Berlin, and died at Marseilles, August 8, 1824.

The modern spirit of our classical schools which is now dominant at all the universities of both continents, Europe and America, may be said to date from him. He was the father of textual criticism, and his work *Prolegomena in Homerum* (1794) was the first attempt at a scientific treatment of the Greek national epic.

In spite of Wolf's great merit as a scholar and thinker, Goethe

*Cf. Alexander W. Craford, "The Philosophy of F. H. Jacobi," *Cornell's Studies in Philosophy*, No. 6.

had an intense aversion towards him because he had analysed the Homeric epics, denied their original unity, resolved them into several rhapsodies, and doubted the historicity of Homer's personality. Goethe's dislike of Christian liberal theologians and their higher criticism was practically based on the same reason, for the poet loved Christianity, even its mythology and legendary excrescences. He objected only to the narrowness of Christian exclusiveness which called all other religions pagan and would not allow him to love and revere the gods of Olympus.

Those who had attempted to critically analyse Christianity or the Christian Gospels, as Wolf treated Homer, became at once an object of Goethe's scorn, and the man upon whom he poured out the full vial of his sarcasm was Professor Karl Friedrich Bahrdt.*

Bahrdt was an unfortunate man mainly on account of the age in which he lived and the treatment he received as a liberal theologian, which finally proved his ruin and left him a physical and moral wreck. He was professor first at Leipsic in 1766-68, then at Erfurt in 1768-71, and finally at Giessen in 1771-75. Deposed for his rationalism he became director of the Philanthropin, a humanitarian school at Marschlin in 1775, whence he was called to Dürkheim as superintendent general and pastor, but the imperial council declared him incapable of holding ecclesiastical office and forbade him to publish any of his writings. Driven into exile he took refuge in Prussia where he lectured on philosophy and philology at Halle, 1779-89; but having published a satire in the form of a comedy entitled *Das Religionsedict* (1788) in which he castigated the Prussian church government, he was sentenced to one year imprisonment. The degradation in prison proved his ruin. After having served the sentence he was broken in spirit and character, and the only way left to him of making a living was by conducting a dram shop.

Nowhere is Goethe's dislike for a critical analysis in literature more forcibly seen than in his attack on Professor Bahrdt's book entitled *Prologue to the Latest Revelations of God*. Goethe's satire is a dramatic sketch little known outside the narrowest circle of Goethe specialists. It has not been received into Goethe's volume of poetry but appears in the Cotta edition in volume XVI, pp. 171-175 among a number of smaller, mostly insignificant productions. So far as we know it has never been rendered into English, and so

* Born at Bischofswerda, Saxony, August 25, 1751; died near Halle, April 23, 1792.

we offer a translation of our own. The title which is a copy of the title of Bahrdt's book, reads as follows:

"Prologue to the latest revelation of God interpreted by Dr. Karl Friedrich Bahrdt.—Giessen, 1774."

Here is Goethe's treatment of the subject:

(Professor Bahrdt at his desk writing. His wife enters.)

Mrs. B. Come dear, to the party; we must not be late,
Nor make our friends for the coffee wait.

(Professor Bahrdt without minding his wife raises his paper and looks at it.)

Prof. B. An idea happens to come to me,
Thus should I speak, if Christ I'd be.

(At that moment a trampling as of hoofs is heard outside.)

Mrs. B. (startled). What trampling hear I on the stair?

Prof. B. 'Tis worse than students I declare,
Like quadrupeds,—an awful din!

Mrs. B. What fearful beasts are coming in!

(At this moment the four Gospel writers enter with their four symbolical animals. Mrs. Bahrdt shrieks. Matthew is attended by an angel; Mark, by a lion; Luke, by an ox; and over John hovers the eagle.)

Matt. We learn you are a brave good man,
And do for our Lord as much as you can.
In Christendom we are pushed about,
Hard pressed and almost crowded out.

Prof. B. Welcome dear sirs, but I'll say right soon,
Your visit is not quite opportune,
For a party of friends awaiteth me.

John. Children of God they surely be,
And we will be glad to join you there.

Prof. B. I fear they would be shocked and stare!
They are not accustomed, 'tis to be feared,
To flowing garment and untrimmed beard,
Nor are beasts admitted as visitors,
They would be driven out of doors.

Matt. In former days 'twas custom thus,
Since Christ, our Lord, appointed us.

Prof. B. Tut, tut! that can't be helped, and so
You can not to the party go.

Mark. But tell me, what do you expect?

Prof. B. I will be brief and quite direct:
Your writings are, I must confess,
Just like your beards and like your dress,

Or like old dollars, no longer at par,
 Whose mint-stamps at a discount are,
 Were they re-coined with copper alloy,
 All people would take them at par with joy.
 Thus you, if you wish to count again,
 And be acceptable to mén,
 You must become like one of us,
 Beard trimmed, well dressed and smooth,—just thus!
 In modern fashion and debonair,
 That changes at once the whole affair.

Luke. I see myself in such a dress!

Prof. B. You needn't go far for that, I guess,
 My own will fit you!

The Angel of Matt. What a sight!
 An evangelist in such a plight!

Matt. St. John has bidden us adieu,
 And brother Mark is leaving too.

(The ox of Luke approaches Bahrtdt and hurts him.)

Prof. B. Call off that beast that belongs to thee,
 Not even a lap-dog accompanies me.

Luke. I will go hence, for as I see,
 This house won't suit our company.

(The four evangelists and their train of animals exeunt.)

Mrs. B. What manners! I am glad they quit!

Prof. B. Their writings shall me pay for it.

* * *

This humorous scene contrasts the modern professor of theology who puts on style and belongs to society with the original roughness of the four evangelists.

Goethe objects to the higher criticism not from the standpoint of orthodoxy, but for purely literary reasons. He dislikes to have the Gospels modernized, because he prefers them to remain rugged, and even sometimes crude, as in part they are, for the same reason that he objects to a critical dissection of Homer. He prefers to enjoy a literary document of the past in its own native originality.

We may add that Goethe's objection to men like Wolf, the philologist, and Bahrtdt, the rationalist, was to a great extent unjust or at least onesided, for we need critique and negation, not as an end, but as a means to find a better and truer affirmation. This onesidedness may be the reason why the poem has been overlooked and almost forgotten. Liberals did not care to quote it, and dogmatists knew very well that Goethe's objection to higher criticism was not

prompted by orthodox loyalty. But the poem is characteristic of Goethe's positivism which condemned negativism in both parties, liberals as well as dogmatics.

In a brief poem entitled "The Critic," Goethe vents his wrath in these lines:

"I had a fellow as my guest,
Not knowing he was such a pest,
And gave him just my usual fare;
He ate his fill of what was there,
And for dessert my best things swallowed,
Soon as his meal was o'er, what followed?
Led by the Deuce, to a neighbor he went,
And talked of my food to his heart's content.
'The soup might surely have had more spice,
The meat was ill-browned, and wine wasn't nice.'
A thousand curses alight on his head!
'Tis a critic, I vow! Let the dog be struck dead!"

Critics are mere yelpers, says Goethe in another poem, and their barking only proves that the person barked at is their superior in attainments or position.

"Our rides in all directions bend,
For business or for pleasure,
Yet yelpings on our steps attend,
And barkings without measure.
The dog that in our stable dwells,
After our heels is striding,
And all the while his noisy yells
But show that we are riding."